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ABSTRACT

As humanists, we aim to intensify the powers of thinking and of feeling in those whom we teach; to open to our students every possible avenue to thought, emotion, and expression; and to keep ourselves alive while we are doing these things. Must such humanistic aims be relinquished if the harsh realities in contemporary academe force us to take on such mundane chores as teaching business communications? This paper concludes that much teaching activity for any course is more journeywork than humanistic endeavor and that teaching any course can become mere journeywork. But it also concludes that humanism is more an approach to life than a selection of courses and that we can live and demonstrate humanistic values through teaching virtually any course in the curriculum if we are sufficiently determined and imaginative. (Author)

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TEACHING BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS JOURNEYWORK OR HUMANISTIC ENDEAVOR?

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A friend, who teaches in another discipline, recently sent me an article entitled "Why Teach English?" In it, a retired English teacher named Mary Ellen Chase recounted the difficulties she had experienced years ago in explaining to an elderly grandmother (whose academic experiences had predated even the pedagogical concept of English teaching) exactly what it is that English teachers teach, and why.[1]

Such questions might seem absurd (or even insulting) to professors in some other disciplines. Indeed, I can almost hear the acid remarks: "Well, I've always suspected they didn't know what they were doing over there in English." But surely no more profound questions could be posed to one who teaches in any discipline. And certainly these are the questions we must address, and not at a superficial level, in attempting to decide whether teaching business communications is mere journeywork or whether it is worthy of such high-sounding nomenclature as "humanistic endeavor."

Chase concludes in her article that "our one aim [as English teachers] is to intensify the powers of thinking and of feeling in those whom we teach; and the only method we have of doing this is to open, in countless ways, every possible avenue to thought, emotion, and expression and to keep ourselves alive while we are doing so" (p. 24). Certainly, when we have intensified the "powers of thinking and of feeling," we have successfully engaged in a "humanistic endeavor." But can we possibly turn business comp into an "avenue to thought, emotion, and expression"? And, perhaps even more difficult, can we "keep ourselves alive" as humanists while doing so?

These are virtually the same questions I had asked myself several years ago when I was appointed to chair a committee to organize a new course in business communications. The freshman composition requirement at our university had recently been reduced from six to three semester hours, and we obviously needed students to replace some of those lost through this change. So my first reaction was probably similar to that of many in these days of falling English enrollments. I thought that teaching the course would probably be a pain, journeywork of the worst sort, but I also thought that performing this periodic chore would be a small price to pay for the privilege of continuing to pursue the world's most satisfying profession, teaching literature.

Our committee surveyed textbooks and chose one that included business letters, reports, and oral communications. Then we prepared a sort of skeletal outline for the course and planned some activities that would be well supported by the textbook. The Department of Business Administration approved our plans, and so the course entered the catalog. I won the dubious privilege of teaching it the first time it was offered.

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To be honest, of course, much of teaching anything, even literature, is journeywork. Preparing course outlines and reading lists, making out examinations, grading themes, averaging and recording grades, ordering films, operating audio-visual equipment, attending to reserved-book procedures with the library, keeping attendance records--these and many similarly uninspiring details fill much of every teacher's day. Certainly, teaching business composition incorporates its share of such mundane chores, too. And somehow, the strict conventions of business-letter form make letters seem even more boring to grade than freshman themes. So, by the time I had outlined the semester's work, including twenty letters and a formal report, I was appalled by the amount of pure drudgery I was committed to perform. In this sense, there's no denying that teaching business composition is journeywork, or worse.

Of course, it is always a relief to get all the preliminary procedures over with and to meet the students at last. But I had some trepidations about meeting those thirty business majors. I expected that their attitudes and interests would be quite different from those of most of my other students, and in this expectation I was not wrong. I expected also that they would be reluctant students, since they were required to take this course and it would entail a great deal of what they might consider busy-work. But in this negative expectation, I was mistaken, because I have rarely had more highly motivated composition students. Almost without exception, they came to the course expecting to learn something that they felt they needed to know.

Perhaps the most apparent difference between these business majors and my usual liberal arts clientele, though, was the business students' clarity of purpose. They knew (or certainly thought they knew) exactly what they wanted to do, professionally and otherwise. They were quite outspoken, lively people, and they enjoyed a sharp interchange of ideas as much as an English major usually does. But their ideas were much more firmly planted in the physical world, and they perceived little value in pursuing an idea for its own sake; their interest was in its fruits. Attempts to evoke esthetic responses or motives met only puzzled expressions. Not only were they unable to define the term "estheticism"; they probably did not even believe in it. Thus, I quickly learned to relate every activity to the expectation of a practical, tangible result. That a letter should have unity, carefully chosen words, clarity, a sense of completeness--this fact they readily accepted if it seemed that such a letter would get better results. That it should have those qualities simply because it would be a better letter--a better expression of themselves, a creation in which they might take pride--seemed to them an absurd notion.

And so it was that I arrived at my concept of business communications as receiver-centered communications. These business majors readily perceived the advantages to be gained from considering first and foremost the reaction that a particular message might be expected to evoke from its

receiver, and so I built the course around that central theme. All composition assignments were approached with two initial questions: how do I want the reader to respond? and what can I write which will make that response most likely?

This receiver-centered approach worked so well with the business students that I decided my other students might well profit from it also, and since that semester I have structured the freshman composition course around the same two questions and have given them due consideration in my literature courses, too. After all, they are the questions that determine the success or failure of any piece of writing as communication, whether it be a business report, a freshman theme, or a lyric poem. Although a poet may well create a lyric that succeeds as expression without considering the reader at all, usually he too must address the same questions if the poem is to succeed as communication--and that is the only function it can have to us as readers.

Thus, somewhat paradoxically perhaps, teaching business communications led me to an enlarged sense of what is meant by "humanism" and by "humanistic endeavor." Others are humans, also, and the objective perspective may well be as humanistic as the subjective one; that is, examining the responses of others to a piece of writing may well be as "humanistic" and creative as examining it according to more subjective criteria.

So, getting back to Chase's statement of our aim as English teachers, with which this paper began, my experiences affirm that we can, even when teaching business communications, "intensify the powers of thinking and of feeling in those whom we teach; . . . open . . . avenue/s/ to thought, emotion, and expression and . . . keep ourselves alive while we are doing so."

Of course, if you have ever had to memorize one hundred lines of Hamlet, as I did in high school, you know that teaching even Shakespeare can be turned into mere journeywork; and it is infinitely easier to do the same with business communications. Further, as previously noted, a great amount of journeywork certainly is involved in teaching anything, although perhaps more is involved in teaching business communications than most other courses in our curriculum.

But the important point is that humanism is much less a matter of what courses we teach than of an approach to life. Since human beings spend about half their waking hours engaged in earning a livelihood and many of the rest in making business or consumer decisions largely in response to business communications, teaching this course may well offer more opportunities than any other to promote the humanistic approach to life where it will produce far-reaching results.

Further, not only our survival as a viable discipline but even the survival of our civilization may depend upon our willingness and ability to incorporate the teaching of humanistic values and concepts into the

teaching of whatever courses our increasingly technological society needs to have taught. I hope that we as English teachers can adapt to our changing world and the accomparying changes in academic curricula sufficiently to continue to give students what Donald E. Morse calls "the greatest gift of all: freedom to be and develop to the limits of their talents and capacity for growth, through our teaching of reading, writing, and imaginative literature."[2]

Getting back to the basic questions which title this paper: is teaching business composition journeywork or is it a humanistic endeavor? My answer is ambivalent: yes, much of teaching business composition is journeywork; but yes, it can also be--and we must make it to be--a humanistic endeavor. David H. Stewart says that "humanism, like sex and patriotism, is something that must be lived. Too much talk about it may be a sign of counterfeiting."[3] So if teaching business communications is your lot, go forth and live your humanism. Your students and your world need it.

[1]Mary Ellen Chase, "Why Teach English?" National Retired Teachers Association Journal, September-October 1976, pp. 23-25.

[2]Donald E. Morse, "Of Floods, Fish and Idle Faculty," Texas College English, Fall 1976, n. pag.

[3]David H. Stewart, "Departmental Development: Reaching Out," ADE Bulletin, November 1976, p. 31.